



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

Feature Release: May 19, 1994

Inez Connor 202-219-3861
Rick Bates 306-787-0726

TAKING FLIGHT: BIRDS FLOCK NORTH TO CANADIAN PRAIRIES

With spring's expansive days comes the instinctive tug of nature for birds to flock and prepare for their journey to northern breeding grounds. Many of these birds -- waterfowl and shorebirds among them -- make the wetlands of prairie Canada their destination.

For most, their destination is Alberta, Saskatchewan or Manitoba, the heart of the Canadian prairies. Once there, the birds become more territorial in nature and the great flocks disperse, as pairs search out safe havens to mate, build nests, and hatch and raise their young.

In past decades, however, the number and quality of wetlands in their breeding grounds have dropped dramatically, putting the future of these birds at risk. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan is working to reverse that trend and provide new hope for the future of wetlands and the birds and wildlife that depend on them.

Prairie Canada's wetlands are so valuable as a breeding habitat, especially to waterfowl, that it is sometimes called the duck factory of North America. This unique sweep of land, referred to in geological terms as hummocky or knob and kettle terrain -- and by locals as "pothole country" -- was formed about 10,000 years ago with the retreat of the last ice age. Glaciers cut a swath through the area, and when they left, melting ice filled incisions in the land with water. The result was a landscape dotted with thousands of "potholes" of water.

These wetlands are the single most important breeding area for North America's ducks and other wetland-dependent birds. They're also an important staging or stopover area during migration for arctic-nesting geese and shorebirds. But like wetlands in the United States, Canada's valuable resource is in

(more)

trouble. It's estimated that over half of the original wetlands in both prairie Canada and the United States have been lost due to drought and development. And those that remain are threatened by agricultural practices. This is particularly true in the Canadian prairies, where agriculture is the dominant industry. Of the remaining wetlands, 80 percent of the fringe areas were detrimentally impacted by agriculture during 1981 to 1985.

To help correct these problems, both countries are participating in an unprecedented agreement to restore wetlands and protect the wide variety of wildlife that depends on them for survival. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan aims to preserve our wetland and waterfowl heritage.

Through the Plan, funds contributed by U.S. non-federal sources are matched by the federal governments of the United States and Canada, Canadian provinces, and non-government organizations to provide a pool of capital for habitat work in vital wetland areas. In the United States, federal funds come from appropriations and wildlife-related sources authorized by the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, passed in 1989.

Since inception, the Act has provided \$105 million in matching grants for nearly 300 North American Waterfowl Management Plan and other wetlands conservation efforts in Canada, the United States, and Mexico. These federal funds have been matched by \$202 million from partnerships. Legislation has been introduced in the Congress to extend and gradually increase the appropriations provisions of the Act from \$15 million to \$40 million by the year 2000.

The North American Plan has far-reaching implications in the three countries. It brings numerous benefits to the environment by helping to ensure biodiversity, but there's an enormous spin-off in dollars and cents as well. In the United States in 1991, over 98 million Americans spent more than \$59 billion on wildlife-related activities. Add to that the sheer pleasure these millions of people experience while they are hunting, bird watching or engaging in outdoor photography, and the importance of the investment in preserving wetlands becomes apparent.

Top priority under the Plan is protecting the prairie pothole areas in the United States and the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan through the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture and the Prairie Habitat Joint Venture, respectively. This area, roughly 10 percent larger than Texas, produces from 60 to 70 percent of the continent's waterfowl in good years. Because of wetland loss and degradation, however, those numbers have dropped drastically in recent years. A look

(more)

at the variety of birds that rely on these wetlands gives an indication of how vital it is to reverse these losses.

Ducks

There's good reason this area is called a duck factory. Historically the prairies of Canada have hosted more than one-third of North America's ducks during the breeding season, when the prairies' sloughs and marshes become the summer home to species from across the United States, Mexico, and Central and South America.

In 1992, the Canadian prairies hosted 75 percent of the continent's redhead ducks and 60 percent of the blue-winged teal, along with 56 percent of the gadwalls, 54 percent of the shovelers, and 42 percent of the canvasbacks.

At one time, the prairies supported half the continent's mallards, but by 1992 that number had dropped to 34 percent. Pintail numbers have also declined, down from 59 percent to 31 percent.

In addition to shrinking wetland habitats, ducks face another threat -- predators. The Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation coordinates activities of the North American Plan in the province of Saskatchewan, and Dr. Dave Duncan, manager of biological services with the SWCC, explains how the two problems go hand in hand: "Because there are few wetlands and there is less vegetation surrounding those that remain, birds are forced to nest in smaller areas -- the fringe around a slough and along roadsides -- rather than in large uncultivated areas. That puts the eggs more at risk because the nests are concentrated in areas where they are easy for predators to find." This makes the work of the North American Plan all the more critical in righting the balance of nature across the prairies.

Geese

Most of the majestic Canada geese that depart the United States in their distinctive V-shaped flocks end up in the Canadian arctic during the breeding season. All of the continent's Ross' goose and 99 percent of the white-fronted goose also use wetlands in the Canadian prairies as staging sites during migration.

Shorebirds

The Canadian prairie region is an important staging area during migration for arctic-nesting shorebirds such as the long-

(more)

billed curlew, willets, avocets, lesser yellowlegs, sanderling, the least sandpiper, and the marbled godwit. Many of these birds make the long journey from South America to Canada's far north.

Rare and Endangered Species

The prairies are critical for three protected species -- the Caspian tern, piping plover, and whooping crane. The story of the whooping crane is legend among birders. In 1938 only 18 were sighted on the continent. By 1992 there were 134. The climb has been a slow but steady one, aided by careful monitoring and management of the species. Wetlands in the Canadian prairies are valuable staging sites for whooping cranes during their migration from Texas to Wood Buffalo National Park, located on the border of Alberta and the Northwest Territories. In Canada a special recovery team is, among other things, working on a project to assess the possibility of creating a new nesting area for the bird.

Dale Hjertaas, an endangered species ecologist with Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management, is a member of the recovery team. He feels it's important for the group to approach their task in a holistic manner, and points out, "When a habitat is properly managed, there are benefits for more than one species of wildlife. We're trying to ensure that funds are used in a way that helps both primary and secondary targets."

In the province of Manitoba alone, for example, habitat development under the North American Plan will benefit 126 species of birds, 12 amphibians and 30 mammals.

Ducks, geese and shorebirds by the thousands make the journey north every year, driven by instinct to destinations that have been altered by drought and development. Through the efforts of the public and private partners in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan in Canada and the United States, the future is beginning to look brighter for these international travellers.

-DOI-

Note to Editors: This feature news release, written by Elise Stoesser, may be used in whole or part.